



## NJDOE News

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### Safety Report Released **Commissioner Librera Announces Update of Action Plan for Safe Schools**

Commissioner of Education William L. Librera today announced an update on the state's plans to help ensure that New Jersey students attend school in safe learning environments. The plan consists of a wide variety of initiatives designed to prevent or respond to incidents of violence in the schools. In addition, Commissioner Librera announced release of the Department of Education's annual report on *Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Schools*.

"New Jersey has taken aggressive steps in recent years to keep our schools safe for all students," Dr. Librera said. "Governor McGreevey and I are steadfast in our commitment to build upon past success and to promote new programs and initiatives that are based on sound research and show the most promise.

"While no school can be immune from school violence, all schools can take positive action to establish strong school climates where learning comes first and that those people who would bring violence into our schools are dealt with swiftly and appropriately," the Commissioner said.

The action plan for safe schools covers upcoming activities in the following areas: guidance documents, the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) Initiative, student discipline forums, the Safe Schools and Communities Violence Prevention and Response Pilot Plan, character education initiatives, the Peer-to-Peer Transitions Project and collaborative efforts with other agencies and institutions.

The Department of Education recently completed a report that summarized nine policy forums it hosted on student discipline. *The Final Report and Recommendations on Student Discipline for Consideration by the New Jersey Department of Education* will be used by the department as a guide for future activities.

Model character education programs were established or improved upon in at least one school in every school district in the state under the New Jersey Character Education Partnership Initiative. More than \$9 million was spent on the state program in the 2000-01 and 2001-02 school years. The department is preparing to apply for a federal grant of \$500,000 in character education funds under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

The department is continuing to sponsor a multi-year project to help reduce factors that place students at risk for substance abuse and other negative behaviors as they prepare to graduate from middle school and begin their high school careers. The department has provided \$200,000 in the two years of the Peer-to-Peer Transitions Project. The department is working with the Department of Health and Senior Services on the project through its existing network of middle school peer leadership programs.

The department continues to assist school districts in meeting the requirements of state regulations governing school safety, violence and health services by providing training to another 60 school districts to establish school-based teams called Intervention and Referral Services (I &RS). Since 1999, the department will have trained 180 school teams.

An 18-month state-funded pilot project in violence prevention and response concludes in November. In the pilot, Richard Stockton State College worked with the Brigantine, Egg Harbor and Atlantic County Special Services School District, to establish plans for preventing and responding to violence. A report on the findings of the pilot program will be disseminated to all school districts.

The latest annual violence and vandalism report, which covers the 2000-01 school year, has been submitted to the education committees of the Senate and General Assembly. State law requires the report to be compiled annually and submitted to the Legislature.

Overall, the schools reported a one-year increase in the total number of incidents of 17 percent (from 21,367 reported in 1999-2000 to 24,973 total incidents reported in 2000-01). Despite the overall increase, one third of

all schools statewide reported no incidents at all. Another third reported five or fewer incidents. Increases were reported in the areas of violence, substance abuse and weapons. The number of incidents involving bias decreased sharply from 1999-2000.

"It is a constant challenge to teachers and school administrators to keep our children in a productive learning environment that keeps them safe from harm," said Commissioner Librera. "The incidents reported by school districts appear to show that although a clear majority of our schools experience few threats to student safety, incidents of violence and disruption appear too frequently in some of our schools.

"We will continue to work at the state level to provide leadership and assistance to local districts in their continuing efforts to operate safe and orderly schools," said Dr. Librera.

This year marks the second year in which school districts used an Internet-based system to report their incidents of violence, vandalism and substance abuse. Since the new system represented a dramatic change in the reporting system, the 1999-2000 report is considered to be a baseline year.

The Commissioner said that the new reporting system and an overall climate that encourages school officials to report incidents are factors that have contributed to the increase in reported incidents.

The largest increases occurred in the violence category (26 percent), with the number of simple assaults increasing by 29 percent and fights by 19 percent. Incidents of substance abuse increased by 20 percent with all three types of incidents (use, possession and distribution) increasing. The number of weapons incidents increased by 7 percent while vandalism declined 4 percent. Bias incidents totaling 172 statewide represent a decline of 52 percent from 1999-2000.

Complete category-by-category charts are included in the full report, which is available from the Department of Education's web site:

[www.state.nj.us/education](http://www.state.nj.us/education)

In addition to data on incidents, the report also describes the many activities the Department of Education has initiated to assist local school districts in preventing or responding to violent incidents. Among the programs are the Intervention and Referral Services Initiative, the Safe Schools and Communities Violence Prevention and Response Pilot Plan and the Character Education Initiative.